Surviving Genocide

NATIVE NATIONS AND THE UNITED STATES FROM THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION TO BLEEDING KANSAS

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Yale UNIVERSITY PRESS
New Haven & London

Introduction

AN ICY RIVER AND A RAGING SEA

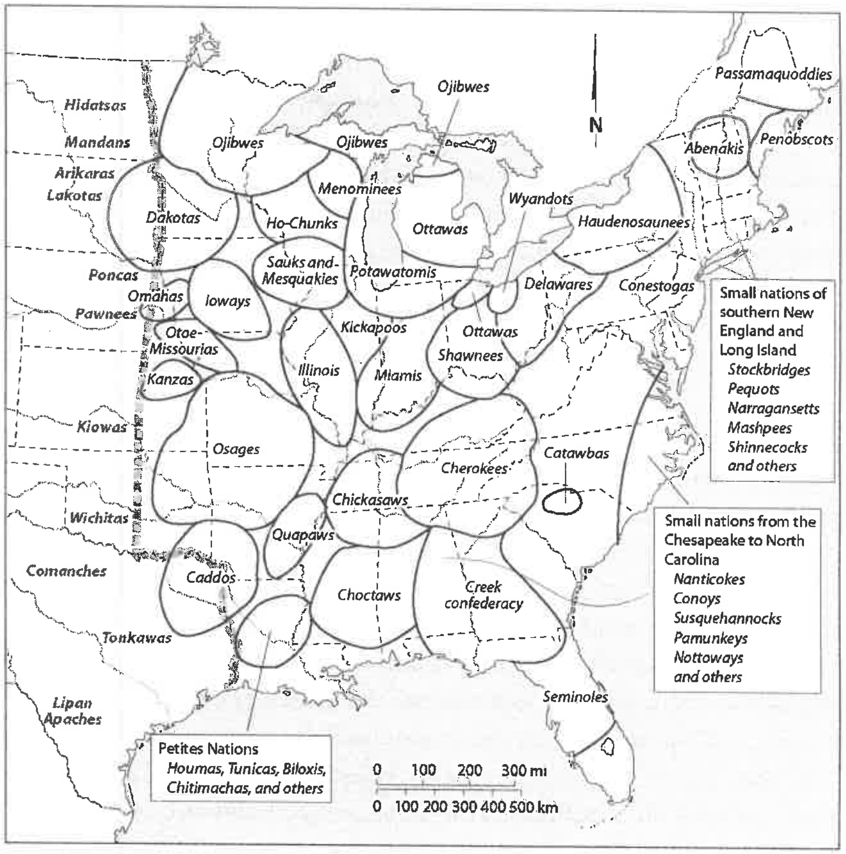
In December 1831, while on the east bank of the Mississippi River at Memphis, Alexis de Tocqueville witnessed a band of Choctaws being forced west from their homelands by the United States government. In a little-known section of his otherwise famous *Democracy in America,* Tocqueville recalled that the "cold was exceptionally severe; the snow was hard on the ground, and huge masses of ice drifted on the river." The Choctaws "brought their families with them; there were among them the wounded, the sick, newborn babies, and the old men on the point of death." As the Choctaws embarked on a steamboat to cross the river, "neither sob nor complaint rose from that silent assembly." Soon, however, Tocqueville heard a "terrible howl." Left on the riverbank, the Choctaws' dogs had realized "that they were being left behind forever." Still howling, the dogs "plunged into the icy waters of the Mississippi to swim after their masters." The implicit fate of their animals forecast a similarly grim future for the Choctaws. Tocqueville predicted that they would soon cease to exist.[1]

In using Choctaw removal as an example of the destruction of Indians under American democracy, Tocqueville posed one of his characteristic paradoxes. The Spaniards, he observed, committed "unparalleled atrocities which brand them with indelible shame," but even so they "did not succeed in exterminating the Indian race" and were even forced to give Indians their rights.

On the other hand, Americans had exterminated the Indians and had done so "with wonderful ease, quietly, legally, and philanthropically, without spilling blood and without violating a single one of the great principles of morality in the eyes of the world." In sum, Tocqueville wrote, "It is impossible to destroy men with more respect to the laws of humanity."[2]

Tocqueville's contrast between an American bloodlessness that was ultimately more destructive than Spanish cruelty exposed the hypocrisy of Anglo Protestantism by standing the "Black Legend" of Spanish atrocities on its head. Nonetheless, Tocqueville seriously understated Americans' violence toward Indigenous people. Tocqueville was also mistaken in predicting that the Choctaws would disappear. Despite unfathomable suffering and terrible loss of life, the Choctaw Nation survived removal. (In fact, Tocqueville's account of the dying dogs as an omen of Choctaw disappearance was inaccurate—in a letter to his mother written at the time, Tocqueville related that the dogs actually boarded the steamship.)[3] Despite these flaws, however, Tocqueville put his finger on the undeniable fact that U.S. expansion unleashed destructive forces on American Indian nations. He also identified what may be a particular genius of the American people: their ability to inflict catastrophic destruction all the while claiming to be benevolent.

Since Tocqueville wrote about the United States' destruction of American Indians, thousands of books have been produced about Native people, U.S. Indian policy, and U.S. warfare against Native communities. Despite this, we lack a general overview of the impact of U.S. expansion on American Indian nations. This book is the first of two volumes intended to provide a comprehensive overview. This volume covers roughly the eastern half of the United States from the 1750s to 1860. As shown in Figure 1, this geography includes the territory the United States claimed when it gained independence from the British empire in 1783; Florida (part of the Spanish empire in 1783 and acquired by the United States in the late 1810s); and the eastern part of the 1803 Louisiana Purchase—Louisiana, Arkansas, Missouri, eastern Oklahoma, eastern Kansas, eastern Nebraska, Iowa, and Minnesota—a region that U.S. officials envisioned as a place to relocate Indians with homelands east of the Mississippi River, which I call the "zone of removal."[4] The second volume will focus primarily on the western half of the United States from the early 1800s to the end of the century, although it will also consider the conditions of Indian nations that remained in the East after 1860. In writing this book, I have benefited from a vast library of published materials. A good portion of this library consists of scholarly histories of individual Native nations, particular events, and phases of U.S. policy. I have also drawn on an array of published primary sources produced by missionaries, traders, travelers, correspondents, ethnographers, and government officials. Many of these sources contain the voices of Native people, and I have tried to bring these voices into the narrative. I have also incorporated the writings of Native people themselves.


Hidatsas
Mandans
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Menominees
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Ottawas
Wyandots
Haudenosaunees
Passamaquoddies
Abenakis
Penobscots
N
Poncas
Omahas
Pawnees
Ioways
Sauks and-Mesquakies
Potawatomis
Delawares
Conestogas
Small nations of southern New England and Long Island
Stockbridges
Pequots
Narragansetts
Mashpees
Shinnecocks
and others
Otoe-Missourias
Kickapoos
Ottawas
Shawnees
Kanzas
Illinois
Miamis
Kiowas
Osages
Catawbas
Cherokees
Chickasaws
Wichitas
Quapaws
Small nations from the Chesapeake to North Carolina
Nanticokes
Conoys
Susquehannocks
Pamunkeys
Nottoways
and others
Comanches
Caddos
Choctaws
Creek confederacy
Tonkawas
Lipan Apaches
Seminoles
Petites Nations
Houmas, Tunicas, Biloxis, Chitimachas, and others
0 100 200 300 mi
0 100 200 300 400 500 km

Fig. 1. Geography of the book, showing territories of Native nations around 1760 (dashed lines indicate modern state boundaries)

What exactly was the impact of U.S. expansion on American Indian nations? How destructive was it? How did Indians respond to destructive forces? To what extent and how did they survive? To begin to answer these questions—the central questions of this book—we need to first recognize that one of the basic purposes of the United States was to take the lands of Native people and to make them available to speculators and settlers, including small farmers and large planters owning enslaved people. Historian Lorenzo Veracini succinctly captures the agenda of settler colonial empires, the United States included, by contrasting settler colonialism with ordinary colonialism. In colonialism (think, for example, of the British empire in South Asia), Veracini explains, the colonizer says to the colonized, "You, work for me." By contrast, in settler colonialism, the colonizer says, "You, go away." How would the United States try to make Indigenous people go away? What, in other words, were the means of elimination?[5]

The United States imagined several ways that Native people might be dispossessed. One possibility American leaders envisioned was that Indians would conveniently disappear as a result of seemingly "natural" and supposedly inevitable historical trends. This self-serving fantasy, however, did not happen. American leaders also talked a great deal about another possibility, that the United States might "civilize" Indians and assimilate them into American society. Historians have generally accepted American leaders' professions of a desire to civilize Indians at face value. In my view, however, U.S. officials were never seriously committed to a policy of civilization. As early as Thomas Jefferson's presidency (1801–1809), U.S. actions made it clear that despite talk of civilization and assimilation, the United States would ultimately pursue a third option for the elimination of Indians east of the Mississippi River: they would be moved west of the Mississippi. For practical reasons, it was not possible to implement a full-scale policy of removal until 1830 with the passage of the Indian Removal Act. In the meantime, the United States took a piecemeal approach to eliminating Indian lands and opening them to settlement by demanding that Native nations agree to treaties that ceded a portion of their lands. The preference of U.S. officials was for Native nations to willingly accept demands for their lands, but many Native leaders refused to agree to land cession treaties. These leaders regarded treaties that other leaders signed (almost always under coercive pressure) as illegitimate and often turned to militant resistance to defend their lands. When this happened, U.S. officials pursued another policy option: genocidal warfare. For several reasons, including cost, lack of capacity, and the necessity to appear to be acting according to Tocqueville's "laws of humanity," the United States did not make outright genocide its first option for elimination. But, as this book will show, U.S. officials developed a policy that "wars of extermination" against resisting Indians were not only necessary but ethical and legal.

As the United States expanded and pursued the elimination of Native people, it unleashed a variety of destructive forces on Indian communities: war and violence, disease, material deprivation, starvation, and social stress. These forces were interrelated in complex ways. American warfare against Indians, for example, sometimes resulted in substantial loss of life from direct killing, but it also had other destructive consequences. American soldiers' rape of Native women, a phenomenon that is documented in the historical record and likely occurred far more frequently than the documents reveal, did not usually result in death. As legal scholar Sarah Deer explains, however, rape frequently "traumatized" Native women and left them unable "to contribute productively to the community."[6] Warfare also frequently resulted in the burning of Indian towns and crops, and this often led to material deprivation and starvation, conditions that favored disease. Similarly, the process of moving eastern Indians west of the Mississippi, though sometimes involving direct violence and massacre, was lethal primarily because the conditions of removal—lack of adequate food, clothing, and shelter, unfavorable environmental conditions (including weather), and social stress associated with forcible deportation—made people vulnerable to a variety of pathogens. After removal, Native nations attempting to make new homes in the West continued to suffer from social stress and poverty, which in turn increased their vulnerability to entrepreneurs seeking markets for liquor. All of this made people more vulnerable to disease, including alcoholism. Indians were not powerless in the face of forces of destruction. As we will see, they managed more often than not to avoid taking massive casualties at the hands of American military operations (and sometimes inflicted great damage on American armies) and were often able to minimize the impact of deadly disease. Indians succeeded in rebuilding their communities after wars and removals, but over time, many Indian nations, suffering from multiple assaults, experienced substantial population losses.

We know surprisingly little about general demographic trends for Indians in the eastern United States. How many Native people lived east of the Mississippi River in 1783, when the United States gained its independence and claimed control over that territory? And how many were in that same territory in 1830, when the United States fully implemented its policy of removal? Although there are no estimates in the existing scholarship, sufficient data exist for individual nations and particular regions to arrive at estimates. Remarkably, despite fifty years of aggressive American expansion, the Indigenous population east of the Mississippi actually *increased* from the 1780s to 1830. The population of some nations declined, but most either remained stable or grew, making for an overall rise. A growing Indigenous population hardly means that U.S. expansion was benign. Rather, an increasing Indigenous population is a testament to Native capacities to adapt to changing conditions and rebuild their populations after periods of warfare and destruction, in short, to their resilience. It is also a major rebuke to the central argument U.S. policymakers used to justify removal: that Indians were vanishing and needed to be moved to "save" them from total extinction.

A growing Indigenous population prior to 1830 further highlights the enormously destructive impact of removal. Historians have written a great deal about the Cherokee Trail of Tears (1838–1839) and to a lesser extent about trails of tears suffered by other Indian nations forced west during the era of removal. Some removals, such as the multiple removals of the Ho-Chunks (Winnebagos) and Sauks and Mesquakies (Foxes), however, are almost entirely unknown. We also lack a general assessment of removal's overall destructiveness and its demographic impact, not just on the trails of tears themselves but as a consequence of them. What happened to the Choctaws Tocqueville observed crossing the Mississippi when they reached their new homes? What happened to other Indian nations in similar situations? Some managed to rebuild or at least maintain reduced populations, but others, especially those forced to move multiple times, suffered from slow, steady, and largely unknown demographic catastrophes in the decades before the Civil War. Equally unclear is the impact of removal on Indian nations with homelands west of the Mississippi in the zone of removal. This area was not an empty wilderness. In order to prepare the way for removal, the United States dispossessed these nations, while allowing eastern Indians coming into the zone of removal to engage in destructive war against western nations. As a result of these factors as well as settler expansion west of the Mississippi, nations indigenous to Arkansas, Missouri, Iowa, eastern Kansas, and eastern Nebraska also suffered material deprivation that led to disease and major population losses. Without taking these losses into account, we will never appreciate the full impact of the United States policy of forcing tens of thousands of Indians West.

As they faced forces of destruction, Native leaders frequently alleged that Americans, or some portion of them, intended not only to take their lands, but to kill them all in order to do so. The title of this book, *Surviving Genocide,* recognizes this important and neglected perspective. For Native people in real historical time, all too often this was the challenge before them: to avoid what they perceived as the very real possibility that their communities, their people, their nations would be totally annihilated. That Indians believed that Americans had genocidal intentions toward them does not by itself "prove" that the United States or its citizens actually committed genocide, but it does require us to take the question of genocide in American history seriously. Debates about this question have been contentious and difficult to resolve. In addition to disputing how to define genocide and assess intent, scholars have differed over the relevant facts, such as how many Indians U.S. military forces actually killed or whether or not Americans gave smallpox-infected blankets to Indians. (For readers interested in an overview of the debate about genocide in American history, I have provided one in Appendix 1.) This book is not intended to resolve the genocide debate once and for all, but I will periodically address the question of genocide and argue that genocide was part of the history under consideration. Not only did the United States establish genocidal warfare as a policy option (as outlined above), American military forces attempted to commit acts of genocide and sometimes succeeded, government officials routinely relied on the threat of genocidal violence to secure agreement to treaties, and the policy of Indian removal had genocidal consequences. As the United States invaded Indian country, Native leaders had good reason to believe that Americans intended to destroy them all.

To write of a U.S. invasion of Indian country recalls an older historiographical moment, one signified by the title of Francis Jennings's 1976 book *The Invasion of America.* Fifteen years later, in his enormously influential work *The Middle Ground,* Richard White called for a different kind of history. "The history of Indian–white relations has not usually produced complex stories," White wrote. "Indians are the rock, European peoples are the sea, and history seems a constant storm. There have been but two outcomes: The sea wears down and dissolves the rock; or the sea erodes the rock but cannot finally absorb its battered remnant, which endures." White sought instead to tell a story of a "search for accommodation and common meaning" in a particular place and time, the *pays d'en haut* of the Great Lakes in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[7] Since then, many other historians, similarly wanting to write new narratives showing Native people as active agents in history, have focused especially on times and places where Indians had substantial autonomy.[8] All of this literature has broadened and deepened our understanding of the long and complex history of North America. It is important for historians to continue work in this direction. It is also important to improve our analysis of times and places where the balance of power did not favor Indigenous people, or in other words, where Indians were subject to a raging sea.

In focusing on a situation of an escalating imbalance of power, I have tried to show that Indians were not *simply* acted upon or *entirely* victims. To do this, I have highlighted the myriad forms of individual and collective action that the historical record abundantly documents and offered explanations for the logic behind these actions. In so doing, I frequently quote Native people as they narrated visions, foretold possible futures, rallied supporters, criticized other Indians, exposed Americans' hypocrisy and racism, expressed fears and hopes, assented to treaties, recalled betrayals, protested injustice, and grieved losses. I have also tried to show not only that Native people *did* survive but *how* they did, or, in other words, to give accounts of what scholars in Indigenous studies are increasingly calling *survivance*.[9] So, this book contains stories of migration, rebuilding, adjustment, reciprocity, peacemaking, resistance, and military victory. At the same time, while Indian nations did survive, it is impossible to deny that the U.S. invasion had a destructive impact on almost all of them.

As Alexis de Tocqueville watched the Choctaws cross the icy Mississippi in late 1831, he was a witness to the "dark side" of democracy in America.[10] Since then, as the United States became a continental and then a world empire, Americans have seldom confronted the fact that their version of democracy required the dispossession of the continent's Indigenous people. Nor have Americans ever really acknowledged the costs to Native people of building the United States on Indigenous lands. At the time of this writing, it hardly seems likely that the federal government will establish a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to honestly assess the United States' impact on Native nations and propose meaningful remedies, including land return, for deep historical injustices. Perhaps, though, the current crisis of American democracy may lead to deeper questioning of democracy's foundations and a recognition of the need for a truthful accounting and a genuine reconciliation with America's first peoples.